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AUTHOR Bullock, Janis
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ABSTRACT

To help children develop social competence, teachers ought to understand differences between popular and unpopular children, know how to assess social competence, and employ techniques which aid the development of children's social skills. In general, popular children have developed skills and strategies which allow them to interact with their peers in various situations. Unpopular children engage in behaviors which are detrimental to peer interaction. Their behaviors and lack of skills increases the likelihood of peer rejection. Knowing how to interact with peers successfully is vitally important, for research shows that early popularity is associated with later positive outcomes, while early unpopularity is associated with later negative outcomes. To identify children who are rejected, neglected, or popular, teachers can employ several methods, including sociometric ratings and rankings, the picture nomination technique, informal observations, and checklists such as the California Preschool Competency Scale. Teachers can also utilize several techniques to improve children's social skills. Such techniques include, among others, reinforcement through praise, structuring the social and physical environment to encourage positive social interactions, planning activites that promote social interaction, providing time for free play, and enhancing children's self esteem. A two-page reference list concludes the document. (RH)

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Encouraging the Development of Social Competence in Young Children

Amanda arrives at school full of energy with a smile on her face, greets her teacher, says good-bye to Mom, approaches a child in the art area and begins conversing with her peer.

Jason clings to his Dad and does not respond to his teacher's greeting. He looks around the room and wanders over to the manipulative table where there are no other children.

Brian approaches a group of children in the block area and hesitates before attempting to join their play. "Why don't you build a fort?" he says to a child. "Get out of here, I don't want to play with you," is the response of the other child.

Why is it that some children are socially at ease with others, initiate interactions within a positive manner, and are liked by their peers while other children are rejected or neglected? How can those people who care for and about children assist those children in their interactions with others who may be lacking necessary social skills?

The development of social competence in young children is considered a necessary prerequisite for social functioning and interaction and has been the focus of research and intervention in recent years. The term social competence often varies and for the purpose of this paper is defined as positive and mutually satisfying interactions among children, their friends, and those adults who care for them. Because early childhood is a time when many children are exposed to nursery school settings and new interactions with peers and adults, there is much that teachers can do to assist in the development of social competence. This seems particularly critical for those children who are having difficulty initiating, establishing and maintaining interactions with peers.

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Popular and Unpopular Children

Popular and unpopular children differ in their social interactions with peers. Popular children are those who are accepted and liked by their peers. They are children who others prefer to play with and have as a friend.

Unpopular children are those children who are not preferred as a playmate. Unpopular children are often categorized as rejected or neglected children. Rejected children are often perceived as disruptive and aggressive by their peers, while neglected children are those who isolate themselves, play alone and ignore or are ignored by their peers.

Popular children generally interact with other popular children which may be due to similarities in positive reciprocal exchanges. Likewise, unpopular children tend to interact with other unpopular children and children who are often younger then themselves. A major consequence to the unpopular child is the inability to acquire the skills necessary to interact with the more socially skilled child.

Popular children have acquired certain skills which make them more accepted by their peers which unpopular children often lack. This issue has been of interest to several researchers who have identified several differences among these groups of children. When children were asked how a new child might get to know other children, those children described as popular stated that the child should suggest a mutual game to engage in, while the unpopular child suggested that a teacher should help out (Asher, Renshaw, & Hymel, 1982). Further, popular children appear to be self-confident, independent, and have acquired specific knowledge and strategies on how to make friends. Unpopular children generally lack these abilities (Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975).

Popular and unpopular children already acquainted with one another also have acquired different skills which seems to influence the way they join groups of children already engaged in play. Those children who are more accepted by their peers are more likely to wait until a break occurs in the play before attempting to join in, adapt to the play in progress, and join in the on-going conversation. Unpopular children are more likely to disagree with

the on-going play and call attention to themselves which appears to be maladaptive to social interaction (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981).

Other studies have found that those children most accepted by their peers tend to be friendly, give attention and approval to others, are accepting of others, give objects away, and abide by another friend's request. These positive behaviors assist in the maintenance of peer interactions. Such negative behaviors as aggression, attack, perceived interference, and disruption are often correlated with peer rejection (Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967). Unpopular children are also more likely to wander around the school, engage in unoccupied behaviors, and disagree with their peers (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981).

In general, popular children have developed skills and strategies which allow them to interact with their peers in a variety of situations such as approaching a new peer, entering a play situation in progress, and maintaining on-going play. Unpopular children, however, engage in behaviors which are detrimental to peer interaction. Their behaviors and lack of skills increases the likelihood of peer rejection.

Long-Term Research Implications

Various outcomes based on longitudinal and retrospective studies of children who have and have not developed social skills have been documented. Children who have developed social skills early in life seem to benefit academically later in life. These children are more likely to be encouraged to take higher-ranked curriculum, post-secondary education and receive better jobs (Bremm & Erikson, 1977). Further, social acceptance early in life has been associated with social adjustment later in life. For example, it has been found that those children judged socially incompetent early in life were more likely to drop out of school (Ullmann, 1975), become juvenile delinquents

(Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972), be underachievers academically (McCandless, 1967), and have mental health problems or psychiatric records as adults (Pritchard & Graham, 1966). Longitudinal studies of children by Roff and Sells (1978) show that poor relations with peers was a predictor of emotional problems later in life. Case studies of individuals committing sexual crimes show histories of rejection by peers and social isolation (Hartup, 1977). Perhaps more important than the long-term outcomes are intervention strategies which can be utilized as a means of assisting children in their interaction with peers as they are growing and developing.

Assessing Social Competence

In order to assist children in the development of social competence skills it is important to identify those children who are rejected, neglected, or popular. Sociometric ratings and rankings are commonly used to assess children's play preference of peers. The rating scale measure (Roistacher, 1974; Singleton & Asher, 1977) can be used to access social acceptance or friendship. Each child is provided with a picture of his or her same-sex classmates one at a time and asked to rate each child according to a three point criteria of: 3 - likes to play with child; 2 - neither likes/dislikes to play with child; and 1 - doesn't like to play with child. Ratings on all children can be tabulated and averaged with a high score indicating that the child is accepted by others and a low rating indicating that the child is not accepted by others. The rating scale provides information about the child's attitude toward other members of the group.

The picture nomination technique (McCandless & Marshall, 1975) can be used to assess perceived popularity or high priority playmates among children. Children are presented with an array of same-sex pictures and asked to pick the child they like to play with the most and second most. These pictures are

removed and children are then asked to pick the child they do not like to play with the most and second most. The children's score is based on a weighted number of positive and negative nominations received by peers. In general, this instrument provides a useful means of assessing children's impact on those who are around them. Because children exhibit a strong preference for same-sex peers (Asher & Hymel, 1981) the peer group is often defined in this manner.

Teachers can spend time conducting informal observations of their own on the children in the classroom. This can involve noting the kinds of play that individual children participate in. The use of Parten's (1933) scale of the social dimensions of play may be helpful. Do some children appear to be engaging primarily in unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative or cooperative play? Rejected children often wander around the room and engage more often in unoccupied and onlooking behaviors. Neglected children have few friends and most often engage in solitary play. Popular children are more likely to engage in associative or cooperative play.

Certainly a child's developmental level should be taken into account when considering the child's level of play. Children need time and many opportunities to develop social interactive skills. However, teachers need to be aware of children who tend to engage in one type of play over long periods of time. This is especially important of those children who rarely interact with peers.

Utilizing informal checklists may also alert the teacher to the types of social skills or behaviors of each child. The California Preschool Social Competency Scale (Levine, Elzey & Lewis, 1969) is one tool that can be used to evaluate the adequacy of interpersonal behavior and social responsibility perceived by the teacher. The behaviors measured are situational in nature and represent competencies considered important to the socialization process. The scale was developed to be used by teachers in the classroom and provides a

general index of children's social competence. The measurement tool can be useful in identifying the child's development, developing intervention strategies, and determining the effectiveness of such strategies.

Assisting Children in Developing Social Competence

There are several techniques that teachers can utilize to help assist children in developing their social skills. After a child's degree of social competence has been assessed, the following suggestions may be helpful.

The role of reinforcement is well established as an effective tool for the promotion of social skills (Asher, Renshaw, & Hymel, 1982). The behavior of an individual child or groups of children can be subjected to direct reinforcement. Teachers can make a point of praising socially cooperative interactions when they occur while ignoring other undesirable interactions deemed tolerable. Specific praise directed to a child immediately after a desirable behavior has occurred tends to provide the strongest results.

Teachers can structure the social and physical environment to encourage positive social interactions. Guiding a child over to a small group of children who are engaging in similar interests and interacting with this child in a friendly manner will often encourage other nearby children to join. Through verbal instruction, teachers can suggest positive ways in which to share and on how to play together.

Further, teachers can plan particular activities which promote social interaction. Those activities which require the cooperation of more than one child to succeed promote more social interaction than isolate toys. In contrast, providing children with unlimited activities and materials decreases the amount of social interaction (Dock & Risley, 1972).

Charlesworth and Hartup (1967) indicate that free play activities such as blocks, dramatic play, or manipulatives tend to produce more positive peer

interaction and reinforcement than structured activities directed by adults. During free play time adults can be aware of those children who may need assistance in their interactions and help accordingly. Putallaz and Gottman (1981) suggest that establishing a form of incentive in which children might be more likely to accept a rejected or neglected child may increase the likelihood of the acceptance of that child. This might involve playing a favorite game or participating in a special activity which is only successful through the combined cooperation of the group.

Within the classroom teachers can continue to work on enhancing the child's self-esteem, providing a predictable environment with clear and reasonable rules, using induction techniques in which reasons are given to the children concerning limitations placed on behavior, modelling appropriate behaviors, and directing and guiding the child in a gentle yet firm manner when necessary.

Some children may lack the necessary social skills for interaction simply because they have not had sufficient opportunities to practice such skills. The observant teacher can intervene and provide appropriate support for this child. In addition, suggesting to a parent the possibility of inviting a peer over to the child's home may aide in the development of social skills and the formation of a friendship. Children who are given this opportunity have been found to be more socially responsive at school (Liebekman, 1977).

Summary

Those children who we care for in our schools come equipped with a variety of social skills and knowledge. Some children are socially at ease and get along well with the peers. Those children, however, who lack the necessary repertoire of skills often have difficulty initiating, establishing, and maintaining peer interactions. These children may further be at risk in a

variety of academic and social situations. As teachers it is important that we take the time to identify the social skills of young children so that we can provide adequate opportunities to those who need assistance. Current research indicates that learning social skills is a necessary component for the development of healthy children and socially competent adults.

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